

## Institutional betrayal in professional care: Trust, power, and the dialectics of care in social work

*Intézményi árulás a hivatásos gondoskodásban<sup>1</sup>: Bizalom, hatalom, és a gondoskodás dialektikája a szociális munkában*

WALTER LORENZ

**Walter Lorenz:** Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Applied Social Sciences (Czechia); Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Faculty of Education (Italy); [walter.lorenz@unibz.it](mailto:walter.lorenz@unibz.it)

**Lorenz, Walter:** Károly Egyetem, Bölcsészettudományi Kar, Alkalmazott Társadalomtudományok Tanszék (Csehország); Bozeni-Bolzanoi Szabadegyetem, Neveléstudományi Kar (Olaszország); [walter.lorenz@unibz.it](mailto:walter.lorenz@unibz.it)

**Submitted** (beérkezett): 2026.04.10.

**Out for review** (lektorálásra kiküldve): 2026.04.16.

**Accepted** (elfogadva): 2026.05.28.

### Abstract

This paper explores institutional abuse as institutional betrayal in child care and in social work more generally, highlighting how breaches of trust and misuse of power negatively affect cared-for children and carers themselves under current authoritarian trends. It examines the dialectical relationship between autonomy and dependency from a psychological and political perspective, emphasising the centrality of trust in healthy psychological development, professional practice, and citizen solidarity. Practical implications for care professionals are derived from a dialectical use of personal identity, experience, theoretical knowledge, and team support, advocating for reflective, empathic, and flexible approaches that transcend rigid institutional routines. Epistemic betrayal needs to be challenged through epistemic justice in recognising and responding to the voices of those affected. The paper calls for a transformation of authoritarian institutional and political welfare cultures towards ethics of care, where trust is actively promoted at both interpersonal and organisational levels to combat institutional betrayal and create a comprehensive “holding environment” (Winnicott).

**Keywords:** institutional betrayal, child abuse, trust, neoliberalist managerialism, authoritarianism, epistemic justice

### Absztrakt

*Ez a tanulmány az intézményi bántalmazást mint intézményi árulást vizsgálja a gyermekvédelmi ellátórendszer és általában véve a szociális munka területén – kiemelve, hogy a bizalomvesztés és a hatalommal való visszaélés negatívan befolyásolja nemcsak az ellátott gyermekeket, de a jelenlegi autoriter trendek közepette magukat a segítők is. A tanulmány pszichológiai és politikai szempontból vizsgálja az autonómia és a függőség közötti dialektikus kapcsolatot, hangsúlyozva a bizalom központi szerepét az egészséges pszichológiai fejlődésben, a szakterület gyakorlatában*

<sup>1</sup> Ez a fogalom az utóbbi években hazánkban ártértelemződött: gondoskodás alatt elsősorban paternalista gondoskodást értettek. A tanulmány a kifejezést viszont annak eredeti értelmében használja.

*és az állampolgári szolidaritásban. A gondoskodást hivatásszerűen végző szakemberek számára a személyes identitás, a tapasztalat, az elméleti tudás, és a támogató teammunka dialektikus alkalmazásának gyakorlati következményei vannak, és ezek a merev intézményi rutinokon túlmutató reflektív, empatikus és rugalmas megközelítések mellett szólnak. Az episztemikus árulást az episztemikus igazságosság révén kell megkérdőjeleznünk, felismerve és válaszolva az érintettek hangjára. A tanulmány az autoriter intézményi és politikai jóléti kultúrák átalakítását a gondoskodás etikája révén szorgalmazza, ahol a bizalmat aktívan fejlesztik mind interperszonális, mind szervezeti szinten, az intézményi árulás elleni küzdelem és egy átfogó, Winnicott-i értelemben vett „megtartó környezet” megteremtése érdekében.*

**Kulcsszavak:** intézményi árulás, gyermekbántalmazás, bizalom, neoliberális managerializmus, autoritarianizmus, episztemikus igazság

### **Institutional abuse as institutional betrayal of trust**

In recent decades incidents of serious abuse of children and young people in institutions have received increased public and academic attention. For instance, trust in an up to then deeply revered institution, the Catholic Church in Ireland, was shaken in the 1990s when survivors exposed the systematic abuse they had suffered in religious residential institutions for decades. This led to the Ryan Report (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009) which exposed shocking chronic and widespread abuse that had been covered up by church and state authorities and the long-lasting trauma inflicted on victims (Garrett, 2010; Carr et al., 2010). Similarly, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) documented minutely the extent of abuse in numerous institutions and its damaging consequences in terms of mental health, behaviour and personal relationship difficulties, education levels, and employment and economic insecurity. Corresponding public enquiries were conducted in the USA, in Canada (Law Commission of Canada, 2000), the UK (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022), in Germany (Spröber et al., 2014), Austria, and many other countries (see overviews by Miller, 2025, and Wright et al., 2017).

The ensuing academic and public debate on how to stop institutional abuse has been helped by the introduction of the concept of institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). Institutional betrayal occurs when the moral agency of persons in organisational positions of responsibility is threatened or suspended by, or replaced with, policies and practices that neglect or violate the well-being and dignity of residents. Instead further procedural convenience, personal or institutional gain or deliberate deception concerning malpractice prevails. The recent study by Zilberstein et al. extended the use of the concept to children who had experienced damaging foster care arrangements which amounted to the same disregard of a young person's needs in terms of reliable, trusting relationships. They found long-lasting effects such as “emotional distress and mental health problems, including grief, anger, loss, emotional numbness, increased vigilance, and emotional withdrawal” (Zilberstein et al., p. 8) resulting also from this type of institutional betrayal on account of the entire foster care system that betrayed those children in care. This indicates that institutional betrayal in all cases involves also *personal betrayal of trust, both of which must be redressed* (Daly, 2014).

To prevent institutional betrayal from occurring we need to examine therefore the factors that constitute trust in personal and in institutional relations in conjunction. Trust is a complex multilevel issue that has been analysed from psychological, sociological, economic, managerial, and political perspectives. In all contexts, aspects of risk and interdependence

emerge as constitutive (Offe, 1999). Establishing trust in social work practice requires the combination of different disciplinary insights, and professional practice must strive to combine scientific reference points with lived personal and professional experience enacted through the only “instrument” available to this discipline, the forming of relationships (Heino et al, 2026). The proposition in this paper is that these skills need to be understood and developed dialectically. Trust cannot come about simply on account of tighter regulations and legalistic remedies (Sitkin & Roth, 1993) or by appeals to honesty and goodwill. Professional relationships and competences in all contexts and in institutional practices need to be oriented towards trust-building.

An analysis on the importance of trust, as an essential ingredient in healthy psychological maturation, will be followed by considerations of how trust in professional relations must be secured through skills that go beyond those required at personal and intimate level, although they are based on the same principles. One elementary condition is that they should be grounded in explicit and transparent standards of public accountability and respect for human rights; and that their practice therefore has a public and political dimension (Warner, 2015). It always relates to the level and quality of trust in the wider societal and political context. Improvements at institutional and at political levels in this regard can only be achieved when professionals put ethical standards into practice in their interaction with people in their care and equally in their dealing with the management of their organisation. But most of all, they need to ensure that victims of malpractice voicing their lived experiences are heard and taken seriously as the basis for organisational and political changes (Taggart et al., 2025).

Care professionals are faced with social and political contexts that on one hand have become ever more complex in terms of the plurality of lifestyles, personal identity choices and value positions. It has been observed that our societies have been moving away from institutional trust (in political and public institutions generally, and hence also in constitutional democracy) towards finding trust at the individual and network level (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). On the other hand, there is much more attention given to professionals making mistakes (Biesel et al., 2020) and they are faced by growing organisational and political authoritarianism, which means that their work is being subjected to ever more standardisation and stringent monitoring. This sets the scene for institutional betrayal becoming a complex but crucial issue in professional practice.

### **Trust, attachment, and vulnerability**

This means that society is becoming more individualised and personal liberty is a central demand, while at the same time we become ever more dependent on each other. The political dilemma of liberty and interdependence requires first a fundamental examination of the existential human tension between autonomy and dependency, which is crucial for understanding the dilemmas faced by care professionals.

Personal and particularly intimate relationships among humans are a constitutive element of our human existence. Being born in a state of utter helplessness, in contrast with practically all other animals, makes us on one hand totally dependent on the care, attention and stimulation by others so that we can form reliable attachments (Ainsworth et al., 1979). Much of that dependency and vulnerability remains over the life cycle, albeit in different forms, and the damaging effects of insecure bonding in early infancy have been amply confirmed (e.g. Schore, 2001). We must remain embedded in social relations in our private and in our public

lives and we can perform practically no task in total isolation. We are constantly in interaction with others, be that in family life, in education, work or leisure activities, directly, and now ever more, virtually. Contemporary research in social neuroscience and psychology emphasises the fundamental role of social connectedness in human functioning. The recent review by Haslam et al. (2022) confirms that ongoing social relationships are essential for cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being, and that social isolation can have detrimental effects across all life domains. At the same time, the care that others give us, is in us human beings not governed by the kind of instincts that in animals determine reliable care arrangements. Human caregiving must be learned within specific cultural contexts (Bornstein, 2012), hence organised, and safeguarded through habits, conventions and, in modernity increasingly by legislation.

Equally, from an early age onward humans are equipped with a strong urge to be independent, which needs to be pedagogically guided because upon this their healthy development also depends (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). Parents and caregivers will have experienced how strongly a 3-year-old child can reject an offer of help in climbing steps, crossing the road, and putting on clothes. This urge manifests itself with renewed force in adolescence, a phase of psychological development that is primarily geared to ensure mature self-sufficiency in judgement and action and has relevance for all adult behaviour as demonstrated by the “Self-Determination Theory” (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2017).

This dual need of humans for autonomy and interdependence, with all the tension it causes over the entire life cycle, and which characterises all personal relationships, has been recognised politically in modern societies in the form of the status of citizenship. The modern concept of citizenship is intended to bestow on individuals’ rights to self-determination regarding practically all aspects of life, choice of partner, choice of occupation, choice of religion and lifestyle. T. H. Marshall (1950) traced the development of three stages in the development of modern citizenship from civil to political, and finally, social citizenship in the various forms of the welfare state that are meant to secure interdependence grounded in rights that secure liberty. Simultaneously, citizenship also brings obligations and therefore requires citizens to contribute to society, to show solidarity not only with specific others, but with the community as a whole. Affirmations of interdependence, from civil engagement to paying redistributive taxes, strengthen the moral code that makes the overall caring culture of a society a lived reality.

Seen from this fundamental perspective, modern society is formed from the precarious balance between dependency and independence that characterises humans at the psychological level. I want to argue that professional carers are essential mediators of these balancing processes at both levels. They not only have a special responsibility to enable individuals to maintain their personal balance between autonomy and interdependence so that they can build healthy personal relations – they also have an equal responsibility to see that the institutional arrangements that frame their caring duties reflect and promote the same healthy balance of ensuring personal freedom while providing supportive structures on the basis of equality. Structural conditions and regulations are an important architectural feature that helps to secure this balance, but they cannot be effective by themselves without being practised and reinforced by individual, everyday commitments to shared values that express this precarious but precious balance.

The proposal here is that trustworthiness of institutions and persons depends on their ability to constructively engage in this constant balancing process between both needs in human relations, which constitutes therefore the central responsibility of care professionals. References to rights and obligations become thereby a constitutive element but are insufficient by

themselves to bring about trust. Rights are meant to ensure that a person is being recognised and supported, but in achieving this a sense of personal freedom must be preserved. This means that rights must always be activated anew in concrete situations in a manner that expresses this balance, and only when they become a lived experience beyond being a formal right “carved in stone” do they contribute to the development of trust in reciprocal relationships. Trust must be “worked at” and endorsed anew rather than being taken for granted. Yes, people must be able to claim their rights, but the moment a right must be claimed forcefully, trust has already been called into question.

### **Implications for professional practice with vulnerable children and young people**

These considerations concerning the centrality of trust in relationships have profound significance for social work and all caring professions, including, for instance, teaching (Di Lisio et al., 2025), and medicine (e.g. Petrocchi et al., 2019). These professions deal mostly with persons whose sense of autonomy is only developing or has become questionable or fragile, who find themselves in a state of vulnerability and insecurity from both a physical and emotive side. For social workers it is obvious that social problems constitute vulnerability of a special kind because they bring with them unstable social relations and therefore, in most cases, a weakening or breaking of trust in relationships that must be strengthened, mended, or substituted.

As mentioned, it is a well-established principle in child psychology and development that trusting attachment to a caring person at an early stage is the basis for the later ability to form stable relationships, both with other persons and with oneself. Lack of trust in others has serious implications for trust in oneself, one’s social abilities and therefore one’s complete sense of identity. We know from attachment studies on early infancy that insecure bonding can manifest itself in both indifference to others and in over-attachment and clinginess, a sign therefore that the balance that constitutes trust has been upset and this deficit is being over-compensated in both directions (Cassidy & Berlin, 1994). Dealing with this type of vulnerability in situations where professional substitute care is required is therefore a very delicate matter. It calls for competences that are oriented specifically to the re-establishment of trust, as much as that is possible in young people who have been deprived of such relationships for a long time (Frederick et al., 2023). Children bring their emotional history along with them and when that history is being ignored, trivialised, or over-emphasised, they tend to react very strongly against such treatment. An Australian study of skills needed by social workers when helping young people in transition found: “Young people expressed a need for workers to display genuine interest in connecting with them, and to understand and accept what was important to them. (...) Young people detailed positive experiences with workers who listened non-judgementally to them” (Ellem et al., 2020, p. 113). Building trust in that way was a crucial goal.

This is particularly noticeable in adopted children where adoptive parents often try to operate from the premise that after adoption a child can be glad to forget a troubled past and simply start afresh and enjoy all the benefits of new surroundings. Adopted children in those circumstances often make sure that their new parents are being confronted with the discomfort they still carry within them. Perceiving and understanding the needs of a vulnerable child, or indeed of any individual experiencing challenging social circumstances, necessitates highly specialised competences. This is due to the inherent risk that interventions may destabilise the delicate balance of trust – either by fostering excessive attachment and, consequently,

dependency, which could impede the individual's progression towards autonomy; or by maintaining an overly formal and detached stance, thereby reinforcing the individual's suspicion of the world of experts being alienating and inaccessible so that withdrawal becomes a protective mechanism.

### **The dialectic use of skills that constitute trusting relationships**

Children in the care of a professional always pose this profound challenge to skills and form therefore one of the most demanding areas of professional care work that necessitate a range of highly specific personal qualities. These have variously been listed as being trustworthy, empathic, genuine, and reliable (Pringle et al., 2019). The question is of course how these qualities are being enacted, and while the skill of empathic listening plays a central role, we need to go into details of how this professional skill can be related to principles that build trusting professional relationships (Heino et al., 2026), which will be listed and discussed below. One consideration that relates to each one of these reference points is that none can be summarised and practised in unambiguous terms in the format of a prescription. There are no sets of instructions that one can follow to build up a skills repertoire that produces trust in the manner one would construct a building or a bridge. Instead, the central professional skill is to be mindful of the oppositional dynamics which I described initially as constituting human relations. They are of dialectic character, which means that their oppositional interplay must be approached reflectively. Here the notion of critical reflectivity leads to the awareness that implementing a principle can be either helpful or detrimental and both effects must be weighed up against each other, and this in direct interaction with the person concerned.

### ***Personal security and identity***

One fundamental aspect in forming professional relationships is knowing one's own identity make-up (Ruch, 2005). Personal security, itself a product of biographically stable relationships, is certainly a valuable point of orientation, but if that security shows in the form of a standard of self-confidence that allows no variations, weaknesses, and doubts, this can come across to others as an impenetrable façade. Vulnerable persons can perceive this as the – for them unreachable - expectation that only the same degree of confidence would constitute a fully mature and independent person. This is not to say in reverse, that one could “advertise” or impose on the other person one's self-doubts as a standard of normality, thereby trivialising attacks of insecurity and self-doubt as something that was “simply part of life.” The important part of our attitude towards personal identity is not *that* we possess a particular version, but *how* we deal with it through constant reflection, how we operationalise it in relations, how we contact certain parts of our self when meeting others and keep others to ourselves.

This matters particularly in the encounter with children and young people in relation to their ethnic and cultural identity. There was a period in UK social work when “ethnic matching” was bureaucratically applied to child placement practices. Yes, it was important that children's different ethnic backgrounds were finally receiving recognition rather than purely their abstract “care needs” (Barn, 2007), but a truncated understanding of race awareness led initially, for instance, to all foster arrangements being cancelled where white parents looked after black children, as if the mere formality of identical skin colour would ensure that recognition of ethnic identity. This caused the bureaucratic disruption of many valuable cross-ethnic bonds with

foster parents, and it took a long and ongoing struggle to find a professional pathway through this jungle of contradictions (Burrow et al., 2006). The dilemma is repeated also in considerations concerning gender identity. Yes, female social workers are better placed in services for women who have suffered intimate abuse, but their gender as such cannot be the guarantee for an appropriate understanding of the client's needs. This challenge is being magnified now that so many other identity aspects like religion, sexual orientation, and other physical and cultural attributes count increasingly in society and in "identity politics" in the search for the recognition of one's distinct identity called into question by globalisation (Appiah, 2018). But identity under any of those aspects must be treated neither as being just "given", nor as being simply a matter of individual choice. Both approaches negate the dialectic nature of the processes of social relationships as stated. Skilled, sensitive social work interventions instead promote secure but flexible identity developments – not just in children and young people.

### ***Experience***

Experience is another constitutive factor of professional competence, and this in terms of personal as well as professional "lived experience", a concept that is now much under discussion for social work practice (O'Leary & Tsui, 2022). Both levels are interwoven and this has been recognised, for instance, in the important role that supervised placements have on professional courses for social workers. During placements and under competent supervision, students should not learn routines and standard methods of intervention but should learn how to critically and reflectively relate their personality make-up and biography to particular helping situations (Rankine & Beddoe, 2020). The sharing of challenging life experiences certainly works well in self-help groups and situations. But offering personal and professional experience can also become a power instrument to underscore superiority, particularly since memories can be easily manipulated. The decisive aspect therefore is the genuineness with which the experience is offered, without demanding that a person in a related difficult situation would learn from the professional's experience and want to take the same route to overcome the difficulty. Children are particularly sensitive to how carers bring their own life experience to bear, either as a means of showing comprehension or as the exact opposite of seeing the child's story only from the professional's perspective. Ultimately what counts is not what aspects the person with experience demands of another one to accept or to relate to, but what specially a young person chooses to relate to or to ignore, and professionals have to remain open to a flexible approach to this learning opportunity by examining their own way of knowing and being from different perspectives (Smith et al., 2025).

### ***Professional skills repertoire***

Learning methodical skills and having a solid theory base for professional practice are inalienable conditions that make social workers accountable professionals and are therefore preconditions for trust. But again, what matters are the sensitivity and flexibility with which methods are being applied. Care institutions that follow a specific therapeutic approach can be highly successful and can build expertise and reputation on their success, but such institutions can also become authoritarian treatment regimes that allow for no doubt or flexibility. What is more, when residents may show resistance against being subjected to a defined method, this

can be interpreted as the person needing this treatment even more and all the “therapeutic” efforts then go into breaking that resistance. This rigidity manifests itself not just through theory-grounded approaches but can also come about through the ossification of institutional routines. Although the classical study by Goffman (1961) of “total institutions” excluded facilities for children, the concept nevertheless allows the identification of regimes in which staff have been equally institutionalised as residents and no longer question existing routines. Professionals always need to be ready to “take back their method” and be a “real person”, with all the risks that entails.

### ***The importance of team support and supervision***

Team support and supervision in institutions certainly are extremely helpful arrangements to keep care staff attuned to the needs of residents and to confront work challenges and difficulties professionally. But also in this regard, institutions are very vulnerable to the team spirit becoming something conspiratorial. Facing challenges collectively and showing support for each other can go in the direction of institutionally tolerating or condoning problematic staff behaviour from an erroneous sense of “loyalty” while truthful confrontation could become an occasion for team growth (Walton, 2009). The direction in which team support leads must therefore be monitored critically.

The same distinction can be made also with different forms of supervision (Hajnó & Havrdová, 2023). In recent debates, attention has been drawn to the misuse of supervision as a managerial tool of control that can result in a kind of mind control in organisations. This has been termed abusive supervision and the dehumanising effects this can have on staff in organisations has to be taken seriously as a contributing factor to a culture of institutional abuse (Caesens et al., 2019).

### **Structural organisational influence and (hyper-)accountability**

In contrast to therapy or counselling, care work takes place prevalently in institutional contexts. This means not just that services have an organisational format, be they governmental or non-governmental, but that operators do not only represent themselves in relation to service users but have a public mandate. This means that they must account for their actions not just to a professional body but to political authorities and the wider public. Problems with this structure of accountability arise when it is being manipulated and it becomes a one-way process of professionals having to carry out instructions and making service users fit into regimes with ideologically driven values. This applies not only to outright totalitarian states, and social work in Nazi Germany sets a warning example when it aided racist policies (Barney & Dalton, 2006), but political manipulation of professionals is spreading today in democratic countries. The prevailing shift towards neoliberal principles in contemporary social policies, characterised by the promotion of privatisation, austerity in public expenditure and an emphasis on individual responsibility, puts pressure on individuals to solve their own difficulties, otherwise they risk being stigmatised as wasting public resources. When neoliberal ideas become intertwined with nationalist political ideologies, discrimination based on national, ethnic or other criteria of “worthiness” becomes built into all welfare considerations (Lusk et al., 2024).

The pressure on social workers to “deliver” to either managerial or political ideological dictates has become part of an “audit culture” and produces the phenomenon of

“hyperaccountability” (Sen & Devaney, 2025). It signals a denial of the reciprocity of the true professional caring relationship which is a two-way process of mediating the public mandate of maintaining given standards with the client mandate of bringing the subjective needs of vulnerable people to be heard in a public arena. When this balancing is blocked, relationships become impersonal, and people are effectively denied their citizenship status and are being silenced. And equally, the conscience of social workers and the voice of professional ethics are being silenced under regimes of “rule following” (Munro & Hardie, 2019). The result of authoritarianism is always a fundamental loss of trust.

### **How to combat institutional betrayal and reestablish professional trust?**

Despite these pressures, human agency is always manifest even under constraining conditions. Particularly young people in institutions can articulate their voice in manifold ways although they might have been locked into conspiracies of silence for years. These voices can be perceived in fundamentally two diverse ways, as negative and destructive, purely rebellious and hence labelled immature, or as signs of maturity that demand recognition (Davies, 2019). Instead of responding in an authoritarian manner, professional carers see in them pedagogical opportunities of rebuilding trust by differentiated, empathic listening and responding (Gorin et al., 2021). Only trusting, reciprocal relationships can give access to the authentic voice of children’s needs (Cossar et al., 2016).

These considerations concerning trust in caring relationships extend far beyond the mere psychological level. On account of social work’s public mandate, they are an element of the profession’s duty to promote what has been termed “epistemic justice” (Fricker, 2007). Enquiries into residential abuse of children have only begun to acknowledge this factor since the 1990s when finally, the victims themselves have been given the opportunity to give their own accounts in the reports. Epistemic justice means that the power implications of our way of knowing, our way of understanding a situation, must be critically examined from different perspectives. Only the voice of vulnerable persons can give access to their lifeworld which professionals from their position can never fully understand. Practising epistemic justice gives professionals access to epistemic resources which their professional expertise would otherwise block out (Devaney et al., 2025). Epistemic justice does not seek security in formal procedures but in precisely that dialectical balancing of oppositional forces in interpersonal relationships outlined above. This competence promotes epistemic trust (Li et al., 2023).

The important point for social work is that promoting and practising epistemic justice requires relationships of trust at all levels, in relationships with people being cared for and in relationships with authorities and organisations. And this is where the indicator of institutional betrayal matters: Carers are less likely to promote trusting relationships when their own working conditions are built on mistrust and a false sense of accountability. I observe with great concern that colleagues in many countries and institutions have themselves become victims of institutional betrayal at the level of the institutional culture of which they are part. Under pressure to perform to given managerial standards and to exercise control functions on clients, they can easily retreat to defensiveness which impedes professional skills becoming developed in the dialectical manner proposed here. As Trevithick observes, “The idea of containing anxieties and working with people in ways that prepare the ground for defences to be lowered and personal truths to be revealed is not an approach that is well supported in most areas of social work, where managerialist agendas tend to operate” (Trevithick 2011, p. 408).

Consequently, staff might develop strategies of passive denial of wrongdoing or of active institutional complicity, both forms of which are equally damaging. Under such conditions, incidents of institutional betrayal that result in abuse of the residents of care homes cannot be addressed and eliminated. The balanced professional relationships with reference to the reflective dialectic way suggested here in which criteria of professionalism must be practised cannot come about where institutional betrayal prevails.

In order to confront the issue of institutional betrayal comprehensively, it is therefore not just a matter of transforming the organisational culture of specific institutions – we need to be committed to changing the entire authoritarian welfare culture that prevails in many countries built on the ideology of *homo oeconomicus* and promote the *homo curans* as carrier of ethics of care (Tronto, 2017). Sociological studies confirm a steady erosion of trust in public institutions in recent decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Only in a trusting, democratic culture, transmitted through trustworthy institutions and professionals, can trust disseminate down to the interpersonal level again. But this is a reciprocal process: where personal contexts and institutions are created that foster trust in their organisational culture, this will eventually contribute to changes in the wider political landscape.

## Conclusions

In intimate relationships and on account of the openness of human relations as well as the ambiguity characterising our human existence between autonomy and solidarity, the occurrence of abuse and betrayal of trust are always a possibility that cannot be eliminated through any kind of tighter regulation or control. Abuse can take diverse forms, from personal to institutional violence, but in all forms the betrayal of trust is involved and adds damage to the physical and immediate psychological harm. The only antidote is building trust into relationships at all interlocking levels, so that the experience of trust at the personal level can equip people to strive for corresponding relationships in institutions and indeed at the level of politics. Inversely, politics oriented towards building trust can enable organisations and individuals at the private level to gain experience in and to build trust in relationships. We all require for our personal and social well-being what Winnicott (1965) called a “holding environment” in which personal and structural factors and values come together. We are currently in danger of losing this sense of security at all levels and social care professionals with their knowledge and experience can play a key role in re-constituting a caring society.

## References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1979). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Psychology Press.
- Appiah, A. (2018). *The lies that bind rethinking identity, creed, country, color, class, culture*. Profile Books.
- Barn, R. (2007). ‘Race’, ethnicity and child welfare: A fine balancing act. *British Journal of Social Work*, 8(37), 1425–1434.
- Barney, D. D., & Dalton, L. E. (2006). Social work under Nazism: An analysis of the “profession-in-the-environment”. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 17(2), 43–62. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v17n02\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J059v17n02_04)
- Biesel, K., Masson, J. Parton, N., & Pösö, T. (Eds.) (2020). *Errors and mistakes in child protection: International discourses, approaches and strategies*. Bristol University Press.

- Bornstein, M. H. (2012). Cultural approaches to parenting. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, 12(2-3), 212–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2012.683359>
- Burrow, A. L., Tubman, J. G., & Montgomery, M. J. (2006). Racial identity: Toward an integrated developmental psychological perspective. *Identity*, 6(4), 317–339. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0604\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532706xid0604_2)
- Carr, A., Dooley, B., Fitzpatrick, M., Flanagan, E., Flanagan-Howard, R., Tierney, K., White, M., Daly, M., & Egan, J. (2010). Adult adjustment of survivors of institutional child abuse in Ireland. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34(7), 477–489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2009.11.003>
- Cassidy, J., & Berlin, L. J. (1994). The insecure/ambivalent pattern of attachment: Theory and research. *Child Development*, 65(4), 971–991. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131298>
- Caesens, G., Nguyen, N., & Stinglhamber, F. (2019). Abusive supervision and organizational dehumanization. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 34(5), 709–728. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-018-9592-3>
- Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. (2009). *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan report)*. Stationery Office. <https://www.childabusecommission.ie>
- Cossar, J., Brandon, M., & Jordan, P. (2016). ‘You’ve got to trust her and she’s got to trust you’: Children’s views on participation in the child protection system. *Child & Family Social Work*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12115>
- Daly, K. (2014). *Redressing institutional abuse of children*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Davies, H. (2019). Trust and distrust: Listening to children about their relationships with professionals. *Social Sciences*, 8(9), 251. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8090251>
- Devaney, C., McGregor, C. & Buckley, S. A. (2025). Leadership through language, terminology and representation: Conceptual and tangible steps towards epistemic justice practices. *British Journal of Social Work*, 55(3), 973–992. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae162>
- Di Lisio, G., Milá Roa, A., Halty, A., Berástegui, A., Couso Losada, A. & Pitillas, C. (2025). Nurturing bonds that empower learning: A systematic review of the significance of teacher-student relationship in education. *Frontiers in Education*, 10, 1522997. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2025.1522997>
- Ellem, K., Smith, L., Baidawi, S., McGhee, A., & Dowse, L. (2020). Transcending the professional-client divide: Supporting young people with complex support needs through transitions. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 37(2), 109–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-020-00651-x>
- Frederick, J., Spratt, T., & Devaney, J. (2023). Supportive relationships with trusted adults for children and young people who have experienced adversities: Implications for social work service provision. *British Journal of Social Work*, 53(6), 3129–3145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad107>
- Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.
- Garrett, P. (2010). ‘It is with deep regret that I find it necessary to tell my story’: Child abuse in industrial schools in Ireland. *Critical Social Policy*, 30(2), 292–306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018309359132>
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Gorin, S., Baginsky, M., Moriarty, J., & Manthorpe, J. (2021). ‘She made you feel like there’s hope’: Gaining a better understanding of how children negotiate their relationships with social workers from their own accounts. *British Journal of Social Work*, 51(8), 3135–3152. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaa148>
- Grolnick, W. S., & Ryan, R. M. (1987). Autonomy support in education: Creating the facilitating environment. In N. Hastings & J. Schwieso (Eds.), *New directions in educational psychology*: Vol. 2. Behaviour and motivation (pp. 213–232). Falmer Press.

- Hajnó, M., & Havrdová, Z. (2023). Supervision at the workplace as a unique space for reflection. In W. Lorenz & Z. Havrdová (Eds.), *Enhancing professionalism through reflectivity in social and health care* (pp. 61–82). Springer Nature.
- Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., Jetten, J., Bentley, S. V., Fong, P., & Steffens, N. K. (2022). Social identity makes group-based social connection possible: Implications for loneliness and mental health. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43, 161–165.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2021.07.013>
- Heino, E., Kalm-Akubardia, M., Koskinen, T., Jaakola, A.-M., Kangas-Kalinen, A., Lamponen, T., & Sarin, I. (2026). Building trust with children and parents in the social work context: A scoping review. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 56(3), 1097–1118.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf234>
- Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. (2022). *The report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse*. <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/inquiry/final-report.html>
- Law Commission of Canada. (2000). *Restoring dignity: Responding to child abuse in Canadian institutions*. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/lcc-cdc/documents/lcc-archives-reports/JL2-7-2000-1E.pdf>
- Li, E., Campbell, C., Midgley, N. & Luyten, P. (2023). Epistemic trust: A comprehensive review of empirical insights and implications for developmental psychopathology. *Research in Psychotherapy*, 26(3), 704. <https://www.doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2023.704>
- Lusk, M., Boryczko, M., & Stoesz, D. (2024). Authoritarian nationalism and social work. *International Social Work*, 67(5), 1135–1148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728231221359>
- Marshall, T. H. (1950). *Citizenship and social class*. Cambridge University Press.
- Miller, V. (2025). *Child sexual abuse inquiries and the Catholic Church: Reassessing the evidence: Second edition, revised and expanded*. Firenze University Press. <https://doi.org/10.36253/979-12-215-0588-7>
- Munro, E., & Hardie, J. (2019). Why we should stop talking about objectivity and subjectivity in social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(2), 411–427. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy054>
- Offe, C. (1999). How can we trust our fellow citizens. In M. Warren (Ed.), *Democracy & trust* (pp. 42–87). Cambridge University Press.
- O’Leary, P., & Tsui, M. (2022). Lived experience: A constant companion for the social work relationship. *International Social Work*, 65(6), 1075–1077.
- Petrocchi, S., Iannello, P., Lecciso, F., Levante, A., Antonietti, A., & Schulz, P. J. (2019). Interpersonal trust in doctor-patient relation: Evidence from dyadic analysis and association with quality of dyadic communication. *Social Science & Medicine*, 235, 112391.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112391>
- Pringle, J. McAteer, J., Whitehead, R., Scott, E., Milne, D., & Jepson, R. (2019). Developing a taxonomy to characterise trusted adult support in the lives of adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 76(1), 30–36.
- Rankine, M., & Beddoe, L. (2020). The space to think critically: How supervision can support sustainable practice in social service organisations. In M. Rankine & L. Beddoe (Eds.), *Sustaining social inclusion* (pp. 171–185). Routledge.
- Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017). *Final report* (17 vols.). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/final-report>
- Ruch, G. (2005). Relationship-based practice and reflective practice: Holistic approaches to contemporary child care social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 10(2), 111–123.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2005.00359.x>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. The Guilford Press.
- Schore, A. N. (2001). Effects of a secure attachment relationship on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 22(1-2), 7–66.

- Sen, R., & Devaney, J. (2025). Accountability and hyperaccountability in child protection scandals. *Child & Family Social Work*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13301>
- Sitkin, S. B., & Roth, N. L. (1993). Explaining the limited effectiveness of legalistic “remedies” for trust/distrust. *Organizational Science*, 4(3), 367–392. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.4.3.367>
- Sköld, J. (2013). Historical abuse – A contemporary issue: Compiling inquiries into abuse and neglect of children in out-of-home care worldwide. *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 14(Suppl. 1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14043858.2013.771907>
- Smith, C. P., & Freyd, J. J. (2014). Institutional betrayal. *American Psychologist*, 69(6), 575–587. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037564>
- Smith, M., McCulloch, T., & Daly, M. (2025). Being, knowing and doing: Aligning ontology, epistemology, and axiology to develop an account of social work as practice. *Social Work Education*, 44(3), 522–537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2024.2330598>
- Spröber, N., Schneider, T., Rassenhofer, M., Seitz, A., Liebhardt, H., König, L., & Fegert, J. M. (2014). Child sexual abuse in religiously affiliated and secular institutions: A retrospective descriptive analysis of data provided by victims in a government-sponsored reappraisal program in Germany. *BMC Public Health*, 14, 282. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-14-282>
- Taggart, D., Wright, K., Griffin, H., Duckworth, L., Baxter-Thornton, M., Coates, S., Lewis, E., Maxted, F., Shellam, K., Tuck, C., & Ford, S. (2025). Lived experience consultants to a child sexual abuse inquiry: Survivor epistemology as a counterweight to legal and administrative proceduralism. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 159, Article 107147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107147>
- Trevithick, P. (2011). Understanding defences and defensiveness in social work. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 25(4), 389–412.
- Tronto, J. (2017). There is an alternative: Homines curans and the limits of neoliberalism. *International Journal of Care and Caring*, 1(1), 27–43. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239788217X14866281687583>
- Valgarðsson, V., Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Bunting, H., Devine, D., McKay, L., & Klassen, A. (2025). A crisis of political trust? Global trends in institutional trust from 1958 to 2019. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, Article e15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123424000498>
- Walton, J. (2009). *Promoting good quality care through teamwork and effective leadership: A guide to practice development*. National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care. <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/1838/2/Teamwork%20Practice%20Guide.pdf>
- Warner, J. (2015). *The emotional politics of social work and child protection*. Policy Press.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1965). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis,
- Wright, K., Swain, S., & Sköld, J. (2017). *The age of inquiry: A global mapping of institutional abuse inquiries*. La Trobe University. <https://doi.org/10.4225/22/591e1e3a36139>
- Zilberstein, K., Linville, D., & Ruff, S. (2025). When care hurts: Institutional betrayal trauma among former foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 179, Article 108621. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108621>